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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ES](#)  
SUBJECT: AVILA EXPECTS TOUGH CAMPAIGN; RUNNING MATE IN 2-3  
MONTHS

Classified By: Charge D'Affaires Michael A. Butler, Reasons 1.4 (b) and  
(d)

¶1. (C) Summary: ARENA presidential candidate Rodrigo Avila told us April 9 that while he expected sufficient funding to run his campaign, the FMLN might for the first time outspend ARENA. Avila said he expected to choose a running mate within two to three months, and said ARENA was leaning away from a head-to-head debate with the FMLN's Funes. He said the economy would be the most challenging issue for ARENA, especially since there is little he or the party can do about it before elections. End Summary.

¶2. (C) ARENA presidential candidate Rodrigo Avila discussed his candidacy and campaign with PolCouns April 9 in his recently occupied and only partially furnished headquarters in San Salvador. Avila was upbeat, though clearly a bit tired, and realistic about the long campaign that awaits. Avila said the campaign was off to a good start and that he would shortly be announcing Cesar Funes (COENA member and Director of the national water utility ANDA) as his campaign director. (Note: That announcement was floated in the Salvadoran press April 11. Avila was formally presented as ARENA's candidate on April 12.)

¶3. (C) Avila said his campaign was beginning to get its fundraising operation in gear and that he was confident he would have the funding needed to run a winning campaign. However, he suggested that funding would not reach the levels seen in previous ARENA presidential bids, and he speculated that for the first time, the FMLN might outspend ARENA. Before Avila arrived at his headquarters from a photo shoot, his campaign treasurer, Jorge Guirola, echoed that sentiment, telling PolCouns the campaign faced a challenge in convincing workers and party officials that the fat times of previous campaigns were over; austerity was the rule of the day.

¶4. (C) Avila said he had begun serious consideration of vice presidential candidates and that several names had been discussed. However, he said he was still focused primarily on defining the candidate profile he was looking for and only then would he seriously consider individual names. Avila expects to name his running mate within two to three months, at most. He said that while he had initially responded positively to FMLN suggestions of a series of debates between the presidential candidates, ARENA was now considering whether or not a head-to-head debate would be beneficial to Avila's candidacy, given Funes' 20-plus year experience as a TV interviewer. Avila said he understood the FMLN had already been working on a series of trick questions to be planted with participating journalists, designed to place him in a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" position, though he didn't elaborate on specifics.

¶5. (C) Avila said that the slowing U.S. economy and the consequent slowdown in El Salvador were probably the biggest

challenge he faced, with little he or the Saca government could do in the short term. He said that, contrary to the FMLN's claims, public security had improved during the last year of his tenure as Director of the PNC (National Civilian Police) but that these improvements (he specifically mentioned a drop in the murder rate, robberies and assaults) would be overshadowed by economic pressures.

¶16. (C) Avila said that recent changes to COENA - he recently replaced President Antonio Saca as head of ARENA's Executive Board - were meant to be gradual. Avila tied changes in COENA to the challenges faced by his own campaign, i.e., trying to campaign on ARENA's achievements while offering the prospect of needed changes. Avila said he was responsible for the initial wave of changes in COENA and had intentionally limited those changes, to avoid the appearance of a sudden change of direction for ARENA. Avila said we should expect a series of steady, gradual changes inside ARENA as the campaign progresses, primarily aimed at emphasizing the social component of Avila's candidacy.

¶17. (C) Luis Mario Rodriguez, one of the three finalists for the ARENA nomination, was named Executive Director of COENA. The other new COENA members are Oscar Santamaria, Director of Minutes and Agreements; Milagro Navas, Municipal Director; Ricardo Martinez, Vice President of Campaign; and Mariano Turcios, Director of Transportation and Communication. Saca joined former presidents Alfredo Christiani and Armando Calderon Sol as a COENA honorary president and will retain his right to vote on COENA decisions.

¶18. (C) Comment: In yet another of what promises to be a constant stream of polling until presidential elections in March 2009, Salvadoran daily El Diario de Hoy published the results of an opinion poll by Borge and Associates April 15. Respondents gave Funes a lead over Avila (26.8 percent versus 19.7 percent, respectively) when asked for whom they would vote if elections were held tomorrow. However, "Don't know/Didn't respond" garnered 51.5 percent, more than Avila and Funes combined, suggesting that, while we should treat these early polling numbers with skepticism, Funes will present a serious challenge to Avila and ARENA.  
BUTLER